

## INTRODUCTION: WHY CIVILITY MATTERS

Civility isn't just being nice, it isn't just showing manners. Civility is coming together as a civil society, and making people uncomfortable, and doing the right thing, and yelling at people who are not doing the right thing when you have to.

—LARRY WILMORE, *BLACK ON THE AIR*

Civility holds a paradoxical place in our culture and, at this moment, in our public discourse. For some, civility is an unquestioned good whose lack is to be mourned; the loss of civility makes them wonder if we are politically in crisis and how we can continue without improved civility. For others, civility is the source of our problems, responsible for the failure of calcified systems of oppression to change; if only, they think, we were not constrained to be so nice, then maybe real change would be possible. Both sides can point to cases for evidence of their claims, and we would be foolish to think that a strong element of truth does not reside in both characterizations. Yet the friends of civility, we will argue, often provide weak defenses of it, just as the attacks by its opponents do not always hold up well. So what should we make of a talismanic object that all agree is important and surely holds the key to *something*, even though we cannot seem to agree what exactly that is or why we should care? Is civility good or bad? Yes. Is civility a choice with consequences? Yes. Our answers, unsurprisingly, point to a set of partly true and partly false oppositions; we need a better way of analyzing and talking about civility. The argument of this book is that civility is paradoxical in that it is a framework for social and political life and yet has limits and must be set aside in some cases. We come neither to praise nor to bury civility but to understand its place in our discourse and our lives.

## Approaching Civility

Before attempting any analysis of civility, we would like to acknowledge its complexity and multidimensionality by exploring some of the places where it contains important tensions and contradictions. First, we can identify synchronic (in a particular historical moment) and diachronic (through time) versions of civility. Diachronic or genealogical accounts of civility describe how sets of norms for behavior appear, evolve, and disappear over time. Sometimes the timescale is brief; specific words about race and sexuality have disappeared from civil discourse in remarkably short order. Sometimes the timescale is much longer; we have been trying (at least in the United States) to figure out how to simultaneously enable and constrain lively political argument since the founding. We want to emphasize the evolutionary quality of civility in this context, and our explanation is unabashedly functionalist in spirit. No group of elders or authorities sit around a table and decide what is and is not civil; as much as language or other elements of culture respond to (and also create) problematics that require resolution by changing norms of behavior, civility (untheorized) arises organically out of perceptions about what works in human relations over the long haul (keeping in mind the cultural plasticity of *works*), and this functionality is historically conditioned by hierarchies and exclusions at a particular time and place. Synchronic accounts of civility focus on “what we (should) do” with one another as we see things now and where we see social arrangements going. While they can be useful, synchronic accounts often have a brittle, artificial quality, arising from the attempt to freeze a moment in a living tradition, often for the purpose of cementing a particular set of (sometimes unequal) social relations. Synchronic civility represents time- and place-bound attempts to catch lightning in a bottle, whether in a posted code of conduct, in some ground rules for discussion, or in a book. The books, often called behavior manuals (usually having some combination of the words *etiquette*, *manners*, or *politeness* in their titles), themselves come in a variety of genres, from Castiglione’s 1588 *Book of the Courtier*, through nineteenth-century works that combined cooking, housekeeping, and etiquette (Walden 2018), and then to a profusion of twentieth-century books, from the very general to more specific registers (a whole subgenre of military etiquette books, for service people and their families, exists). The patterns of behavior recommended in these books change strikingly over time, though in the contemporary era, one element still predominates: they are highly gendered, mostly written by women and apparently for women; for example, a number of books for “Army wives

and spouses” still exist, but later editions of them (Conetsco and Hart 2013) at least cover wedding situations where the service member is a woman.

Behavior manuals deserve a whole separate study, but for our purposes, their most important quality is a kind of reductionism implicit in the genre, its innate tendency to suppress the evolutionary, nonessentialist character of civility itself. Not only are they highly perspectival, but their attempts at codification reduce the subtle complexity of civility (which is vast and contains multitudes) to a set of rules, whether “ground rules” or “codes of conduct.” As much as these might be a useful starting point for someone, especially in specific contexts (“Oh, that’s how you address people in the military”), such rules not only underdetermine what one is supposed to do but artificially constrain behavior in ways that may not be fully functional. Many objections to civility flow from objections to a particular version of the messages in these manuals, presenting seemingly arbitrary rules imposed “from above.” Sometimes these rules are quite mundane (“Forks on the left”); in other cases, the rule may try to point to a complex and thick interactional norm (“Don’t insult people for no reason”). Or take the case of the rule “Try to get the person’s name right.” This used to seem like a harmless bit of common courtesy, often in a professional context, but the respect it implies for the other person’s identity has taken on new meaning and urgency in the case of transmen and transwomen. Or take the case of “rules” about the taboo quality of the N-word in the mouths of those who are not African American. This is a rule, and yet it is not *just* a rule but a recognition of the long history of failures in civility that came before and results from the attempt to find a way to both acknowledge that history and move forward. We approach civility with the long history of commitments to these rules in mind.

### Civility and Oppression

Any codification of civility/politeness also brings with it the possibility that the rules, once written, might be weaponized. Many objections to civility point to the trauma inflicted by the misuse or gaming of rules of civility/politeness (we will call this *pseudocivility*), and rightly so. The sting of a contemptuous or condescending put-down can last for decades, curdling the very possibility of functional—let alone pleasurable—social relations between the victim and the insulter, and perhaps a whole group of people. Mustering rules of civility/politeness to put others “in their place,” shutting people out or silencing them, is of course contrary to what we will call the

central egalitarian and inclusive obligations of civility. But we should be clear: Other obligations (to justice, equity, etc.) exist, and situations do arise where civility must momentarily be suspended. The hard cases are ones where the injustice is systemic—must then an uncivil response be systemic? We will argue no, realizing it is a legitimate subject for disagreement. Consider, for example, not just the scholarship of Ibram X. Kendi (including *Stamped from the Beginning* [2017]) but also his rousing editorial “What to an American Is the Fourth of July?” from July 4, 2019. Kendi riffs on Frederick Douglass’s famous 1852 oration “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?,” which highlighted the gulf between America’s values and its practice of slavery and made the case that abolition was the only consistent position for anyone who believes in the principles of the Declaration of Independence. Kendi, however, sees this project applicable not just to the institution of slavery but to virtually every other facet of American life, rendering civility, a dialogue between equals or near equals, moot: “Pundits talk of American disunity as if the divide is brothers and sisters fighting. This is a power divide. Let’s not ask why the master and the slave are divided. Let’s not ask why the tyrant and the egalitarian are divided. Let’s not ask why the sexist and the feminist are divided. Let’s not ask why the racist and the anti-racist are divided. The reasons should be self-evident. There’s no healing these divides or bringing these powers together.” Unsurprisingly, he wants to expand the practice of civil disobedience from explicitly racist laws or institutions to structural oppression generally. And that practice will be an uncivil resistance: “On this Fourth of July, the rest of us—and our wealthy white male allies—should be celebrating our ongoing struggles for freedom and not celebrating as if we are free. We should be celebrating our disobedience, turbulence, insolence, and discontent about inequities and injustices in all forms. We should be celebrating our form of patriotism that they call unpatriotic, our historic struggle to extend power and freedom to every single American. This is our American project” (Kendi 2019). For us, this is the central problem of civility in the twenty-first century: How do we account for the justice of Kendi’s position while recognizing the value and force of civility in many contexts? How do we valorize incivility while realizing we have also valorized President Trump’s rhetoric? Part of our answer will be the weighing of competing obligations; part of our answer will be to note the ways in which strong civil resistance is entirely possible (to an extent, this was the project, under a different vocabulary, of Martin Luther King Jr.’s Christian ethic of disobedience).

Given our acknowledgment of the perspectival character of any account of civility, we must ask, Whose civility? Whose experiences inform it? Civility

has evolved, but not perfectly, and its past is sometimes very dark, though civility-as-ground-rules does not always want to acknowledge this ugliness. Keith Thomas confronts this history directly:

In the later eighteenth-century “civility” fell back to its more restricted meaning of good manners and good citizenship, whereas “civilization” came into general English usage, both as the word for the civilizing process and also as a description of the cultural, moral and material condition of those who had been civilized. The word was widely employed with unembarrassed ethnocentricity to suggest that the “civilized” nations exemplified the most perfected state of human society, in comparison with which other modes of living were more or less inferior, the products of poverty, ignorance, misgovernment, or sheer incapacity. . . . The Eurocentric idea of a single standard of civilization reflected contempt for the norms of conduct in other cultures; and the notion of Western superiority was invoked to justify the forcible colonization or commercial exploitation of supposedly barbarous peoples, in the name of a “civilizing mission.” (2018, 5–6)

John A. Hall notes, “The behavior of European states in the rest of the world was anything but civil. Remember the slave trade. Additionally, European ‘liberalism’ within empires overseas was characteristically dogmatic and vicious” (2013, 35). While voices still exist that speak to these assumptions, they no longer have presumption; “unembarrassed ethnocentricity” does not appear defensible. The last fifty years have seen the civil rights movement evolve into a revolutionary appreciation of the struggles for recognition, respect, and equal rights by women, LGBTQ people, Latinx people, Native Americans, those from disparate socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, immigrants, those from non-Christian or nondeistic religions, and many more. This revolution has necessarily created a tectonic shift for civility, displacing old assumptions and problems and introducing new ones.

Let us consider a trenchant current critique that identifies this problem: the phrase “walking in white” has gained currency as a way to critique the tendency for straight, white male authors to take their experience as universal, as everyone’s experience (Báez and Ore 2018). It is certainly the case that with respect to both civility and pseudocivility, people have very different experiences based on their social location. Kristiana Báez and Ersula Ore take civility to task in a deep way; in their experience, civility in academic settings is primarily a tool for shaming and silencing: “Our interest in the

rhetorical construction of civility is driven by our shared and individual experiences with the civilizing strategies of the academy. Civilizing discourse is understood here as a call to insulate white fragility through appeals to language and scholarship that protects whites from racial discomfort. This includes calls for more gracious and less ‘angry’ speech around race as well as calls for more ‘civil’ and ‘courteous’ exchanges that don’t offend white sensibilities” (332). With some justification, Báez and Ore do not see this orientation as a deviation but as the dominant version of civility, entirely predictable from its history: “Civility as a democratic good and social ideal cannot be divorced from its historical usage and meaning. Its etymological and ideological ties to ‘civilization’ and ‘civil society,’ its demarcation of the white ‘civil citizen’ from the nonwhite ‘savage’ and ‘slave,’ and its tie to citizenship and belonging render civility and civilizing discourses racialized technologies of the flesh” (334). Has civility transcended its admittedly racist history, either practically or in principle? This is a complex question (one Kendi and many others ask as well) to which we will be returning. A related question for Báez and Ore follows from Kendi’s notion of resistance: “For us, coping with the expectation to be ‘civil’ means flipping the script in ways that highlight the cognitive dissonance of whiteness. It means managing racial battle fatigue by shouting ‘Look, A White!’ in ways that redirect the burden of whiteness—i.e., the guilt, discomfort, and shame of walking-in-white—back to those who consciously and unconsciously leverage it to dehumanize us and others. Coping means declining invitations to white racial communion while simultaneously agonizing over instances of ‘white-splainin’ and repelling white tears” (335).

Báez and Ore also call upon the notion of “white fragility” (DiAngelo 2018), the defensiveness that marks the reaction of dominant racial groups (and by extension men, heterosexuals, and cisgender individuals) to the recognition of their privilege; without question, that defensiveness can manifest itself as some version of “Well, it’s really uncivil/rude of you to critique me for something I didn’t choose.” If we take the next step of adopting an intersectional stance, recognizing that people have multiple intersecting identities and can be simultaneously privileged and oppressed, we see that the problem of discomfort can have layers and is not simple. We will return to the question of whether making people uncomfortable is the mark of the uncivil or impolite (spoiler alert: mostly not). Báez and Ore’s incisive analysis follows a pattern that requires our engagement: identifying the (mis)uses of civility and finding their cause and then seeking the kind of agency that redresses them. We cannot find fault (nor have we been asked to) in the

“Look, a White!” strategy in the context as they describe it. We want to argue that civility can (often) be the means to inclusive and just social relations, knowing full well that our confidence in our argument rests in part on not finding ourselves endlessly the targets of injustice and exclusion.

We would like our work to be seen as the work of allies. One of the questions motivating this book is “How do we save civility from racists?” In the past few years, Americans witnessed neo-Nazis marching through the campus of the University of Virginia; saw their president mocking, defaming, and insulting a variety of public figures on Twitter; and beheld the return of raucous and violent debates over free speech across university campuses. The ability of racists and neo-Nazis to claim civility is literally amazing, and that anyone takes them seriously is mystifying. But we know—as Báez and Ore have pointed out—that it is actually not all that mysterious, since any progress we have made toward justice and inclusiveness sits alongside a history of civility used as a cover for power and, in a nineteenth-century twist, turning the tables through the conversion of power into victimhood, as some in the antebellum American South pioneered the use of a pseudocivility to refuse engagement with arguments about abolition (roughly “the mere idea of abolition offends my cultural norms and is therefore uncivil and you must stop talking about it”). As indefensible as this move is, no one can be surprised to see it resurface when racist or nationalist factions feel they can show their faces in civil society once more.

On what basis can we judge such behavior as “indefensible”? Sometimes civility is posed (especially synchronically) as a framework in which it is a set of rules that referee interactions among equals. We think this is mistaken. Instead, we will distinguish civil behavior from uncivil based on a commitment to realizing a kind of democratic equality between people. While imperfect, the framework we seek to describe has directionality (stemming from its history, as we will explain in chapter 2) toward relationships that are more equal; less conditioned by economic, political, or social power; and more respectful of mutual humanity. We want to avoid bromides and easy answers. We seek to enrich, or make more complex, our understanding of the role that civility plays in democratic societies—its uses, its limitations, and its possibilities. Such an analysis of civility also requires an analysis of incivility, since both can serve as strategies for making different kinds of connections among citizens. Furthermore, this analysis also demands that we pay attention to the context within which civil or uncivil communicative acts unfold. In other words, civility or incivility is understood and practiced within what we call (to use Charles Taylor’s term) the *social imaginary*. A specific social

imaginary may make agonistic techniques of mutual engagement more or less likely and more or less productive, just as it may make courteous, other-centered practices of mutual engagement more or less likely. Our aim is to show that the meaning, richness, and complexity of civility are greater and more pressing now than at perhaps any other moment. The fragility of both the systems of government to which we are bound and the social relationships that we inhabit are the impetus for this kind of analysis; the hope that democracy might be rehabilitated drives our commitment to understanding the communication practices we use to engage one another. Our social imaginary allows both forms of civility and incivility, both the use of strategy and the search for connection. Our aim is not to endorse one form of engagement universally over another form but to show when, where, and why specific kinds of communication practices may be more desirable or impactful.

### Why Civility?

This book concerns how we think about how we should treat one another; how we choose to engage others with different beliefs, attitudes, or goals; and how we establish relationships with diverse citizens who hold opposing views. Therefore, it is a book about communication and how communicative practices create our shared political and social world. It is also a book about sociopolitical change and what set of communication practices are more or less likely to produce change. By communication, we do not mean the transmission of information; rather, we mean the complex and shared practices that constitute the process of making meaning. Many of these practices go unnoticed because they constitute our daily social interactions. Sometimes this process may require aggressive forms of protest, while other situations might require polite and respectful forms of engagement. Either might engender momentary and evanescent change or generate sustained or enduring change—depending on circumstance, occasion, or context. In the study and practice of communication, there are no universal rules, and this is not a handbook or how-to manual about how to preserve the fragile social stability that marks our moment. Instead, we intend to make a series of arguments about the complexity and value of civility and a descriptive account of how forms of civility or incivility are practiced in an effort to drive social or political change. Such arguments and descriptions seem especially pressing when we read the apocalyptic predictions about an impending civil war and witness the public displays of acrimony that are now so



commonplace on the nightly news, but they also point to enduring and timeless questions about democracy as both a system of government and a way of life. In the *Atlantic*, Adam J. White looks at a book by Supreme Court justice Neil Gorsuch, to make an argument about why institutions by themselves cannot “keep” democracy:

For Gorsuch, civic virtue requires civility. His book highlights the example of his own court. The justices are able to argue and disagree so vigorously in their judicial opinions only because they work so hard to foster a spirit of community with one another: “We eat lunch together regularly and share experiences and laughs along the way,” he wrote, “and whenever we gather for work, no matter how stressful the moment, every justice shakes the hand of every other justice.” . . . “My worry,” Gorsuch warned, “is that in our country today we sometimes overlook the importance of these kinds of bonds and traditions, and of the appreciation for civility and civics they instill.” In a time when many “people are actually calling for an *end* to civility,” when people believe that “more anger is needed [because] the stakes are too high and the ends justify the means,” Gorsuch urged that for “a government of and by the people” to work, the people themselves need “to talk to one another respectfully; debate and compromise; and strive to live together tolerantly.”

How we treat one another ought to always be a consideration when attempting to cooperate or collaborate with others in social or political spaces; this is not a vain hope but an acknowledgment that we live in an intensely interdependent world, not a state of “all against all” or “winner takes all,” and we have many institutions and practices that have, over time, formed (however imperfectly) around making economic, social, and political relations possible.

From the perspective of this book, civility is a form of communicative agency in which power lies within a person’s ability to use language (and other symbol systems) to form relationships. We hope to build a model of communicative agency that begins with the assumption that the power to form relationships is an essential communication practice and that our forms of communicative agency are implicated within social imaginaries that make some practices and relationships easy and possible and others difficult or impossible. In chapter 1, we explain the moral quandaries associated with civility as a form of communicative agency, and we show how civility

and incivility both try to drive social and political change. In chapter 2, we outline the modern deliberative imaginary and its critical counterpart in an attempt to understand how and why our forms of communicative agency are limited by the ecologies we inhabit. In chapter 3, we describe civility as a set of communicative practices in interpersonal and public settings. In chapter 4, we articulate a set of uncivil communicative practices that serve as forms of resistance and rebellion. And in chapter 5, we argue that we ought to find a balance between uncivil and civil forms of communicative agency and that our obligations to others might draw us toward different ways of enacting our communicative agency. We will argue that we ought to hold on to our tradition of civility because it gives us the best chance to both preserve the systems of democratic decision-making and to make durable social and political change happen.

We suspect that some who read this might find the idea of treating morally offensive others with civility to be a form of capitulation or quietism. We prefer to see our approach as promoting reform rather than revolution. We do not fear a few examples of people on one side of a debate screaming at and denigrating those on the other side with such vituperative language that both sides remain entrenched with no sign of change possible and a growing sense of the inevitability of violent conflict as an outcome of an encounter. But we fear scaling those moments up so that they become normal. Democracy is a fragile and difficult possibility because the social fabric that underpins it is always threatened by plural opinions and beliefs that could tear it apart at any moment. We are living one such moment, and we have no doubt that others, at some point in the future, will also live such a moment. We know that democracies collapse for many complex reasons. But at the root of those reasons lies our obligations to others within our democratic systems. When those obligations weaken and cease to drive our interactions or when they get replaced by more calculating or instrumental values and forms of communication, then we might lose more than we realized. As inheritors of the pragmatist tradition, we are inclined to ask about the consequences of the ways we choose to enact our communicative agency. We think the potential consequences of civility are the maintenance and cultivation of relationships between strangers, durable social and political change, good and effective cooperation and decision-making, and the material realization of the democratic values of equality and freedom. In other words, there is much at stake in all this talk about good and bad manners.

We will also argue throughout that civility is more than forms of courtesy, good manners, or graciousness. When we engage one another in civil

communication, we are doing more than just offering polite remarks that seek not to offend. By looking beyond courtesy, we consider civility to be a way of foregrounding, assessing, and analyzing how relationality functions politically at the heart of democratic culture and how communication enables specific kinds of relationships. In other words, we argue that relationships sustain the fabric of democratic culture by the ways in which they constitute meaning and guide decision and judgment. But broken relationships may be the greatest challenge to both democracy and civility. Steven Salaita, a professor at the University of Illinois, was fired in 2014 for his “uncivil” behavior on Twitter, allegedly, and recently gave urgent clarity to this problem: “When I make a public comment, I don’t care if it conforms to the etiquette of a speech manual. I’m instead concerned with the needs and aspirations of the dispossessed. Conditioning critique on the conventions of bourgeois civil liberties, and in deference to specters of recrimination, abrogates any meaningful notion of political independence. To ignore those conventions, to engage the world based on a set of fugitive values, will necessarily frustrate those in power in ways that require protection beyond the scope of academic freedom” (2019). Given that democracy is a wicked problem (as we will explain in chapter 1), relationships may be more important than specific solutions to particular exigencies because solutions rarely scale beyond the specificities of a given moment, while relationships do. Civil communication practices enable, sustain, and develop specific kinds of relationships, just as uncivil communication practices do the same. To put it as clearly as possible, our attention to civility highlights the importance of relationality to democratic culture. We will argue that many of the things associated with democracy—in particular, argument and deliberation—are constituted by specific kinds of relationships rather than (just) forms of speech. To go one step further, we also argue that relationality—the form and meaning of relationships—lies at the core of our understanding of how social change is both produced and deflected. We form relationships in plural democracies because those relationships are critically important for driving social or political change. When we see democracy as a wicked problem, we realize how important relationships are in the process of finding imperfect solutions. Questions about how we treat others are often also questions about the ways that we want others to change. We may engage others in an uncivil manner; that may be an error on our part, or it may be a deliberate form of engagement chosen because of values or actions that we wish those others would change. Occasionally, uncivil people value civility. But even in his bitterness, Salaita’s reflections indicate a complex attitude toward

civility: “My tweets might appear uncivil, but such a judgment can’t be made in an ideological or rhetorical vacuum. Insofar as ‘civil’ is profoundly racialized and has a long history of demanding conformity, I frequently choose incivility as a form of communication. This choice is both moral and rhetorical” (2015). Without endorsing his generalization about conformity, we find his notion of choice completely on target. By focusing on civility, we will also be asking questions about what kinds of communication practices can generate change. Our study of civility, therefore, is an argument that our obligations to and treatment of others constitute a core consideration for any democratic society, and the manner in which we enact those obligations or forms of treatment through communication can determine the course of sociopolitical change. The importance of the relationships between strangers is both a timely and timeless consideration for democratic societies—it seems especially timely given the fragile state of our current moment and especially timeless given the importance of communicative interaction to any democratic system.

Communication practices, whether civil or uncivil, do not happen in a vacuum. Context shapes the meaning of any communicative practice, and therefore, we are also making an argument about the contexts within which civility and incivility are enacted. More specifically, we claim that, at this historical moment, it appears that two overlapping social imaginaries create conditions for making sense of our communicative acts as civil or uncivil. On the one hand, a *deliberative social imaginary* generates a space in which collaborative decision-making becomes possible. Such a space utilizes a set of underlying assumptions that value relationships, practices, behaviors, and modes of interaction oriented toward compromise and connection. Deliberative spaces sanction some forms of interaction by regulating the shape and possibilities for communication. This happens by way of institutional rules, geography and architecture, social and cultural norms, laws, and the other kinds of social and cultural infrastructure that we all inhabit daily. In the deliberative social imaginary, civility is valued over incivility, given that it makes possible many of the goods of social life, and the shape of our environment is arranged in such a way as to promote civility. On the other hand, a *critical social imaginary* is a space of structural inequity that may only respond to conflict. Many figures, relying on the towering work of Karl Marx, have argued for the importance of conflict for producing social and political change. Sometimes that has been true. In a social space marked by structural inequality and oppression, we use discourse to identify, resist,

or critique power, and thus there are moments when we might engage in forms of incivility in order to magnify and call out differences that make collaboration and compromise impossible. We may do so when civil engagement only serves to entrench oppression and inequality with the hope that only fierce opposition can generate material change.

In light of these two different imaginaries, we will argue that we ought to pay attention to the ways in which our communicative agency is positioned in, or implied by, a deliberative or critical context. Some assumptions of the imaginaries overlap, but they are in other ways inconsistent frames for interpreting the possibilities for relationships and actions in a given social context; some ways of interacting are constrained while other ways may seem more natural or desirable. In other words, attending to the social imaginary we inhabit can help us explain to others and ourselves why we communicate in the ways that we do and how constructing, maintaining, or changing our social imaginary influences our choices and habits as rhetorical citizens. For example, working from the assumptions of the critical imaginary, a call for dialogue between the powerful and the oppressed may sound like a tactic of the powerful for delaying change, while in the deliberative imaginary, it may sound like a productive moment of relationship building that can lead, eventually, to social or political change.

We will also make an argument about the details of civil and uncivil communication in public settings. We do not intend to offer a handbook of such practices, but we are invested in showing what the key features of civil or uncivil communication practices are. Our argument is that we ought to be able to find the balance between civil and uncivil ways of enacting our rhetorical citizenship and that we should be able to move from one set of practices to another, knowing when and where to deploy each to different ends. Too much emphasis on uncivil forms of interaction might threaten the fabric of a democratic culture, while too much civility may prevent robust or substantive critiques of power necessary for changing or driving public discourse. We also argue that we ought to develop our awareness of when the deliberative imaginary or the critical imaginary might be obscuring or orienting our attention in impactful ways. At different times, we inhabit each of these social imaginaries, and effective rhetorical citizens are able to move back and forth between them. In other words, we argue that we have competing obligations to the plural others we meet in our democracies, and finding the balance between those competing obligations is a necessary characteristic of a good citizen. This balance is only possible when we realize that relationships

matter in democracies and that communication is just as much a problem of establishing, maintaining, or changing relationships as it is a matter of information exchange.

### Communicative Agency

From our perspective, civility inheres in communication practices, and so before we proceed any further, it is important to unpack what we mean by *communication* and what is at stake when we view civility as a matter of communication. Some outside the field of communication studies may be inclined to see communication as a process of exchanging information. From such a perspective, the communication process involves a sender, a receiver, a channel, and some packet of information that needs to be sent over a distance. This is not our view in this book. We see communication as a process of forming, maintaining, building, fostering, and changing relationships, and through that process, meaning emerges within the relational spaces formed by our communicative interactions. This view is indebted to the pragmatist tradition of John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, William James, and others.<sup>1</sup> Such a view highlights the ways in which meaning evolves in tandem with the effects relationships produce on the participants in social interactions. In other words, we reject the view that meaning is a preexisting property of words, symbols, propositions, or bits of information but argue instead that meaning emerges through social interaction in which different agents come into relationship with one another. Attending to civility as a form of communication practice therefore requires attending seriously to the nature and quality of relationships that are formed within democratic cultures narrowly and social spaces more generally. Those relationships constitute meaning(s) in the communicative sense.

This concern with communication as relationality drove American pragmatism's interest in and prescriptions for democratic culture. In *The Public and Its Problems*, John Dewey (1927) argues that democracy is not simply a form of government or a set of political institutions. It is, instead, a social idea or a way of life. Put more directly, for Dewey, democracy is a set of social relationships of interaction between citizens. Shifting one's perspective from seeing democracy as a system of government to seeing it as a set of social relationships should immediately reveal the importance of a concept like civility. According to Dewey, "The strongest point to be made in behalf of even such rudimentary political forms as democracy has attained, popular

voting, majority rule and so on, is that to some extent they involve a consultation and discussion which concerns social needs and troubles” (154). Obviously the quality of consultation and discussion matters, and in this book, we set out to extend Dewey’s insights into social democracy by unpacking the importance of civility for the process of consultation and discussion that he identified.<sup>2</sup> Dewey’s 1927 *The Public and Its Problems* shows that forms of associated living drove the development of the state as a set of institutions— institutions that could respond to the consequences of the varieties of associated living that emerged socially. In other words, interaction and association came first and the state and its institutions came after, eventually coming to exist in an ecological relationship with one another. From such a perspective, democracy is primarily a matter of community life and secondarily a matter of state functions and actions. At some moments, the state constrains possible relationships; in other moments, new kinds of relationships force institutions to evolve. For the latter to happen, democratic cultures need to be organized into communities capable of holding institutional officials accountable and engaging in robust, deep discussion of public problems. Social change emerges from social interaction.

John Dewey, like many others, favors a particular picture of what authentic or genuine relationships look like. In the concluding passages of *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey suggests that the development of the “Great Community” also meant the revitalization of the local community: “In its deepest and richest sense a community must always be a matter of face-to-face intercourse” (1927, 156). Place matters for community and democracy because interpersonal relationships and attachments are “bred in tranquil stability; they are nourished in constant relationships.” Given these kinds of commitments, for Dewey, communication is a matter of both relationality and social solidarity. The vision of the “Great Community” advanced in *The Public and Its Problems* relies on the “perfecting of the means and ways of communication of meanings” (155). We argue that one of the more important ways of determining how best to “perfect the means and ways of communication” is to consider the role of civility and incivility in forming relationships between citizens. Dewey sought ways for individual citizens to participate in democratic decision-making so that they would realize the interconnectedness of the community to which they belonged. Democracy and community are tied together for Dewey by virtue of the role that communication plays in guiding deliberation and constituting relationships between citizens. These relationships matter a great deal for the prospects and possibilities of change within a democratic culture.

This emphasis on communication as relationality rather than information exchange can be expanded through the concept of *communicative agency*. Communicative agency generally refers to the ability to speak or to express oneself. Most succinctly, it is the ability to create rhetoric. This means that communicative agency exists as a kind of empowerment—it relies on the classical understanding of rhetoric as *dunamis*, a power or capacity. The meaning of *dunamis* is inextricably linked up with agency within the classical Greek world, either divine agency or human agency. It is an embodied concept, meant to highlight the different kinds of powerful capacities for doing that both humans and gods possessed. Communication, in other words, is a powerful capacity for doing, located within the potentialities of human agents; it is a form of power in its nascent state. Communication, very broadly, can be construed as the power to affect people through words, where the fact of communicating implies a relationship. At the same time, communication scholars have always been interested in and attentive to the ways in which communication broadly and rhetoric narrowly are also *tekhne*, or sets of rules and practices for the purposeful use of language. To learn these rules is to learn how best to communicate or to direct human agency through discourse. We go in search of the rules governing the practice of communication to better turn potentialities into actualities or to manage the effects we produce on others through language.

Aristotle, one of the original communication theorists, admits that communication as rhetoric is not easy to practice because it is complicated by the presence of an audience, enmeshed with the speaker in a web of institutions and purposes: “But since rhetoric is concerned with making a judgment (people judge what is said in deliberation, and judicial proceedings are also a judgment), it is necessary not only to insure the argument is demonstrative and persuasive, but also to construct a view of himself as a certain kind of person and to prepare the judge” (2006, 1377b21–24). Here Aristotle tells us that the words themselves are not the only part of the communicative process. Instead, the person enacting communicative agency and the audience listening are essential parts of the process as well. Or to put it more simply, a statement can only be persuasive, for Aristotle, “because there is somebody whom it persuades” (1365b25–28). No communicative agent, from Aristotle’s perspective, has the freedom and power to simply impose an arbitrary and idiosyncratic vision of the world on an unwitting audience; the relationship is always already there, prefiguring the possibilities of influence. Hence the power of communication is relational; it does not belong to a subject but is activated in the relationship that a subject forms with an



audience. The *tekhne* of communication, therefore, is not self-expression: what is inside cannot really travel outside. One's inner sense of self or inner ideas are not directly revealed through communicative action, and audiences are never simply wooed, amazed, or moved by a powerful speaker-as-subject. Instead, the *tekhne* of communication outlines a set of principles for managing a relationship, meeting the constraints of the agency of the audience in order to actualize the potential power of communication in the communal, shared interactions between citizens with agency. Power does not operate from one single point or person; it exists as a potentiality in between, and within, a community of citizens. Communicative agency belongs to both the individual citizen and the audience of other citizens, constraining the freedom of both while being enacted and embodied through discursive choices.

This view combines insights from American pragmatism with rhetorical theory in an effort to articulate what is at stake in the concept of civility. As agents, our powerful capacity for using discourse really amounts to a capacity to form relationships with other agents that will determine future courses of action. Our agency is never just a matter of imposing our will through persuasion. It is always more a matter of managing our relationships with others and with the cultural, social, and institutional context within which we find ourselves. In what follows, we try to outline some of the features of both the power of this kind of communicative agency—in particular, the power to create social change—and the *tekhne*, or set of principles, that could be used to practice civility and harness the power of communicative agency. The search for durable social change within the landscape of democratic culture is just as much a search for communities—replete with communicative agents skilled at forming, maintaining, and transforming relationships with other communicative agents—as it is a matter of a change in laws, advocacy for a specific agenda, or the power of a charismatic leader to create change by force of will. If we think of communicative agency as only a matter of good citizens that are able to persuade other citizens or able to be persuaded by other citizens, then we miss the ways in which both citizenship and persuasion are matters of forming relationships within social, cultural, and institutional contexts.

At the heart of the intersection of communication, agency, and civility lies a set of questions about intentionality and social change within democratic societies. Of course societies change. Can we change them on purpose? Can we help bend the arc of history that Martin Luther King Jr. invoked? What set of practices and what set of circumstances are most conducive to producing change? Does civility inhibit social change by constraining public discourse?

Does it advance social change by creating solidarity and common interests? What are the best available communicative means for generating change within democratic cultures? These are the kinds of questions that we hope to answer in this book by investigating the power and forms of civil and uncivil communication practices within our democratic imaginary. These questions also have ethical implications attached to them. Civility can be viewed as a kind of communication ethics by virtue of the ways in which it highlights the formation and maintenance of relationships. An ethical impulse fuels our desire and ability to treat others with civility, and that ethical impulse might be tied up in the ways in which we chose to generate social change. We can ask the simplest question: Why does civility matter? We suggest throughout that civility matters because it is an embodied way of forming and maintaining relationships, because it holds the potential to generate positive social change, and because it enacts a form of communication ethics—all of which potentially benefit our democratic culture. In order to develop this argument, we will first need to describe the competing deliberative and critical imaginaries within which rhetorical citizenship has been practiced; these imaginaries form the kind of structural scene for practices of civility and incivility.

Let us pause a moment and introduce some useful (though provisional) definitions for civility:

*Weak civility.* A network of behaviors and norms intended to maintain the appearance of comity, ease, comfort, and belonging. Often equivalent to politeness, it may accomplish its goal by strategically ignoring or effacing uncomfortable differences of belief or practice.

*Strong civility.* A network of behaviors and norms that can be used to engage differences in a way that will deepen a sense of community and over time help communities move toward nonviolent systemic change. Strong civility may include deliberations, deep listening, dialogue, confrontation, protest, and civil disobedience.

*Pseudocivility.* The invocation of weak civility norms against strong civility behaviors, resulting in a refusal to engage on the grounds that engaging some difference is always uncivil, even if the difference is arguably of great public and moral importance.

We will reference and build on these definitions as we go on. Here we use them to highlight the ways in which civility is always already a consequential matter of communicative agency.

## Alignments and Temptations

The arguments that we are making about communication as relationality, as agency implicated within a social imaginary, and as a matter of finding a balance between competing obligations are not radically new. We see deep alignments between this set of arguments and several other intellectual preoccupations that have received sustained attention recently. In particular, these arguments are aligned with the resurgent interest in American pragmatism, with existing commitments to deliberation, with systems theory and human ecology, and with the burgeoning interest in rhetorical citizenship. Articulating the ways in which our arguments align with these currents will allow us to put considerations of civility into a broader and more substantive context and will help us rescue civility from shallower interpretations that reduce it to politeness. We must also confront the temptation to dismiss civility, and democracy along with it, brought about by recent questions about just how useful deliberation is for generating change. First we turn to pragmatism and then to the temptation to dismiss democracy and civility.

The intellectual roots of American pragmatism stretch back to the end of the nineteenth century and, most prominently, to the work of John Dewey and William James. Dewey has remained the foremost advocate for the argument that democracy is a way of life, and James has remained an essential proponent of an epistemology characterized by plurality, utility, and skepticism. In the forty years since the publication of Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, pragmatism broadly and John Dewey and William James specifically have influenced a range of different fields, including communication studies. Neither James nor Dewey spent much time considering the relative merits or limitations of civility. They did, however, introduce the importance of communication, experience, inquiry, and relationality as core considerations for both epistemology and democracy. These considerations have been critical to pragmatism's resurgence in the last few decades, and they are critical to how we see the alignment between pragmatism and questions about civility. What Dewey terms "moral democracy" captures a good deal about why pragmatism aligns so deeply with our conception of civility. In his *Ethics*, Dewey describes a kind of ideal society that was diverse while being harmonious and was a fully participatory enterprise in which the powers and capacities of individual citizens were harmonized by their cooperative activities. This emphasis on cooperative participation (what we might call inquiry) shares much with what we will call later the deliberative social imaginary.

The finer details of the philosophy of pragmatism also point to the importance of communication as relationality that we develop in this book. Dewey's emphasis on cooperative activities in democratic life is supported by an epistemology that rejects realism and idealism (or any search for foundations upon which to base truth claims) in favor of an ecological and evolutionary account of knowledge. From a pragmatist perspective, truth is not the property of a statement or proposition; it is, instead, the outcome of a process or a set of practices. Our interactions with others and with our environment become constitutive considerations in the process of generating knowledge. This is why so many pragmatists focus on the relationship between experience and pluralism. If we foreground the interactive way that we experience the world, then we become committed to a kind of political and philosophical pluralism, which suggests that final determinations (Truth) about the world are impossible and that the best we can hope for are workable, though temporary, agreements between diverse ways of experiencing the world. Those temporary agreements are achievements of relationships. We know this because communities make the pluralism and uncertainty of our world, which are never easy, acceptable, and community becomes a central concern for all varieties of American pragmatism. Dewey neatly ties pragmatist epistemology to his commitment to democracy by suggesting that "knowledge is a function of communication and association" (1927, 158), by which he means a function of community life. In this book, we will ask what sorts of communicative practices are necessary for preserving relationships and holding communities together. We think considerations of civility are an intellectual entailment of pragmatism's focus on democracy and epistemology as matters of community life.

John Dewey's commitment to a social imaginary consistent with deliberation is not the only place to recognize the importance of deliberation in general. Many moments throughout Western history have endorsed peer discussion on important matters. Deliberative bodies of all sorts have often been thought necessary for democratic governance since as early as ancient Athens. Our moment has its own champions of deliberation, from Jürgen Habermas and James Fishkin to John Gastil and Amy Gutmann. But today's deliberation is not like that of classical Athens. For Athenian theorists of rhetoric such as Aristotle, democracy was not possible in anything larger than a small city-state because only a face-to-face society could allow the kind of participation—and relationships—entailed by deliberation. Structurally, modern societies may lack the necessary ingredients for deliberation: messages being exchanged interactively at length and under conditions of

reflection. Nonetheless, we remain preoccupied with what might be necessary to cultivate and sustain a deliberating public because of the faith we have in its key role in democracy and to enduring social change. Our moment has turned to the broad idea of “deliberative reason” as an important process of people thinking together aloud and in public for the purposes of decision-making. But as we will surely show in this book, public reason can often be uncivil or built on false facts and specious assumptions. Therefore, we confront many challenges to the possibility of deliberation: declining space and time for interaction between strangers—we see Robert Putnam’s (2001) work as an illustration of this—as well as the role of the media in creating distance and displacing actors in deliberation, the professionalization of deliberation by a powerful class of public officials and media personalities, and the ways in which emotion influences reason, to name a few. These limitations have not stopped scholars from continuing to champion deliberation as a necessary component of democratic life. Instead, many of these challenges have led to renewed and extensive efforts to rehabilitate deliberation as a potential cure for the ailments of our moment.

We do not intend to make any significant pronouncements about the current academic work on deliberation. We remain agnostic about the ability of inventions such as “national deliberation day” to rescue us from polarization and paralysis. However, attention to deliberation must also require attention to the ways in which we treat the others we are deliberating with. And therefore, we see questions about civility and incivility as bound up with questions about deliberation, perhaps at a different register of attention from where philosophers and political scientists orient their work. Deliberation puts people in close proximity on the assumption that decisions are best made when everyone is engaged in a decision-making process. Deliberative bodies, we argue, must always already attend to the ways in which people treat one another when in such close proximity, and this is ultimately a question about civility and relationality. For the kinds of collaborative and cooperative decision-making that theorists of deliberation imagine to work, we must consider how communicative interactions that foreground issues of relationality influence the processes that scholars of deliberation spend so much time describing and prescribing. Accordingly, the arguments we make about civility are also an attempt to extend the conversation about deliberation.

As communication scholars, civility is also a way of showing how important questions of communication are for our habits of citizenship. In that way, this argument also draws us closely to contemporary work on “rhetorical citizenship.” Here we agree that our communication practices are just

as important to our role as citizens as are the rights we are granted by our government. In other words, the term *rhetorical citizen* is meant to highlight the importance of communication in enacting our citizenship. But *rhetorical citizen* comes with a temptation to think ideally about communication as a strictly rational project. We might call this “rhetorical citizenship” after the work of Christian Kock and Lisa Storm Villadsen (2012). This view of rhetorical citizenship privileges the role of rational argumentation in our communicative encounters with others over relationality. But do rational arguments really change minds? Do they preserve the social fabric so necessary for cooperation and collaboration over difficult, pressing problems? This book attempts to extend the conversation about rhetorical citizenship (and about pragmatism, deliberation, and relationality) without falling to the temptation of thinking that the best citizens are the most rational ones.

While the alignments previously outlined may operate as good contextual resources for our arguments, we also need to avoid the temptation of losing too much faith in democracy and thinking that democratic deliberation cannot possibly fix the deep structural problems of racism, sexism, capitalism, and environmental disaster that we are presently living with. The rising tide of violence precipitated by white nationalism reminds us that many people who inhabit our public culture do not have any interest in living well with others. Fascism and demagoguery, we ought to remember, are antidemocratic by virtue of how they divide the world into an “us” and a “them” without any desire for an “us” to live well with a “them.” Those who advocate for liberal commitments to social justice ought to be careful to avoid enacting the same rhetorical and political practices that lead groups on the far right to seek out ways of eliminating pluralism. We see increasing indications that those on the political right *and* left are losing interest in the central democratic problem of constructing temporary alliances between diverse kinds of citizens with a plurality of values. When the purity of one’s political positions (whether left or right) becomes the criteria for evaluating the quality of arguments in public discourse, we can see the rise of antidemocratic forms of rhetoric that seek victory over troubling opponents instead of compromise or collaboration with others who hold views we find deeply offensive. We show some of the rhetorical strategies behind such forms of public discourse in chapter 4. When we are drawn toward arguments about the very limitations of democracy itself, then the stability of our political systems is endangered. In March 2017, Keith Mines (one of several experts that *Foreign Policy* asked to evaluate the likelihood of a second civil war in America) claimed that the United States faced a 60 percent chance of civil war over the next

ten to fifteen years. Other experts predicted a range of 5 percent to 95 percent, with the median possibility working out to 35 percent. Why, in this moment, does the stability of American democracy seem so fragile? Mines cites five conditions that support his analysis: (1) entrenched polarization with no possible meeting place for resolution, (2) increasingly divisive press coverage, (3) weakened political institutions like Congress and the judiciary, (4) the abandonment of responsibility by political leaders, and (5) the legitimation of violence as a way to conduct discourse. The current U.S. president, Donald Trump, has enacted, encouraged, or fueled each of these five conditions. Democracies operate within a scene of robust social intercourse that is necessary for the kinds of cooperation, collaboration, and coordination that democratic political systems rely on for decision-making, and especially for relationships between relative strangers called upon to work together for a common good. In the social spaces of democratic life, we negotiate the shared process of making and contesting meaning. When that shared social process breaks down, then democracy, as a system of government, is susceptible to collapse and failure. The experts in *Foreign Policy* were not communication scholars, but each was pointing to the ways in which we engage one another as rhetorical citizens (i.e., citizens that communicate) as critical to the stability and viability of democratic governance and culture. If we are tempted to think that more democracy is not the answer, then our political system is surely at risk of collapse. Some might view this as a positive outcome, and the temptation to see that as a positive continues to stress the social fabric holding our systems together.

But why, for example, would African Americans or Latino Americans endorse even basic forms of strong civility when so much of their history and present is marked by structural and practical forms of oppression or domination? Why might viewing civility from the perspective of the marginalized lead us to doubt its efficacy and embrace a more radical politics? These are hard and important questions. Many on the margins are likely to have experiences that tell them that civility does not do any good. Author bell hooks, for example, has long offered trenchant analyses of oppression while endorsing modes of transgression that flout norms to help secure justice. We can cite many examples of excellent scholarship analyzing the depth and degree of forms of white supremacy and/or heteronormative gender discrimination. From such perspectives, any endorsement of civility will read like an endorsement of the status quo (with all the troubling forms of injustice so carefully and expertly made clear in both scholarship and the material realities of so many citizens in even the most progressive democracies). We

want to resist the strong temptation to read civility as a mode of endorsing the status quo and discounting the forms of injustice that surround us. We can certainly think about relationality and ethics without tying those considerations to democratic deliberation. But to read civility as something other than capitulation to injustice and the status quo is to remember that, for example, African American women continue to play a central role in community organizing by virtue of their ability to mobilize family, friends, and communities.<sup>3</sup> Or we could look to Jeffrey Stout's (2012) lucid description of organizing practices by mostly Latino groups in the Southwest, replete with instances of strong civility at work in the building of communities capable of advocating and securing change. We recognize that we have, in part, a responsibility to show how and why strong civility might help even those on the margins who have suffered from the forms of oppression that characterize our present and past. This responsibility brings us to the heart of the politics behind this book.

### A Liberal Stance

In an increasingly polarized United States, political stances are often fraught and subject to (often uncivil) dismissal. Even our very faith in democracy itself can be questioned by a variety of figures in all areas of the political spectrum. So we wish to close the introduction by putting our cards on the table and defending a specific kind of commitment to social change that aligns with the value of strong civility. In part, we wish to address the temptation to be skeptical of all that democracy can do as well as the temptation to see civility as useless for those on the margins. We are liberals. Not neoliberals, though that term (which mainly seems to be a term of abuse) will no doubt be applied to us. So we need to explain what kind of liberals we are and how that stance is consistent with other commitments we have made. In a recent book (which draws heavily on Richard Rorty's *Achieving Our Country*), Adam Gopnik (2019) summarizes the debates of the last thirty years or so and eloquently crystallizes the liberal position that aligns with our own self-understanding of our project. The gist of his account is that liberals believe a flawed democracy is still evolving imperfectly toward equality and away from cruelty. His story highlights a core of fallibilism and humility—shared by pragmatists—that tempers the expectations we can have of any actual democracy. Liberals believe that those further left and further right of liberals, while sharing some (or many) liberal ideals, believe too strongly in



the perfectibility of politics. The lesson of revolutions, left and right, is that perfection is brittle and temporary and often comes at an enormous human cost. Hence the liberal tradition is focused on reform: “The foundation of liberalism is cracked in advance. . . . Its foundation is fallibilism—the truth that we are usually wrong about everything and divided within ourselves about anything we believe. Reform rather than revolution or repetition is essential because what we are doing now is likely to be based on a bad idea and because what we do next is likely to be bad in some other way too. Incremental cautious reform is likely to get more things right than any other kind” (Gopnik 2019, 26). Have there been successes in reform in the last 150 years (setting aside, obviously, the U.S. Civil War)? Indeed, many, and most were not achieved through just asking or “making a demand,” as fans of Frederick Douglass like to say:

Militant activism was certainly responsible for the achievement of many of these reforms. But it was specifically *liberal* activism. It wasn’t trying to change everything at once. It was trying to fix what was wrong now. Civil disobedience, women chaining themselves to parliament offices, the bravery of the Chartists in Britain or the popular front in France or the Selma marchers. But in the end their goals were specific, not utopian, capable of being achieved by democratic means of democratic legislatures, even if only when the cost of not achieving them became too great for the powers already in place. (Gopnik 2019, 25)

The point of liberalism is to acknowledge that the complexity of the democratic experience, imperfect as it is, should make us wary about trying to perfect it. The apparent mushiness of liberalism, in its failure to perfect freedom or eliminate oppression completely, is a feature, not a bug: “So, the critical liberal words are not *liberty* and *democracy* alone—vital though they are—but also *humanity* and *reform*, *tolerance* and *pluralism*, *self-realization* and *autonomy*, the vocabulary of passionate connection and self-chosen community. . . . Liberalism *ends* in the center not because that’s where liberals are always thinking the sanity is, but because they recognize that there are so many selves in a society that must be accommodated that you can’t expect them to congregate in a single neighborhood” (Gopnik 2019, 14–15). Liberalism, in Gopnik’s account, is primarily a set of practices rather than a credo, an orthopraxis rather than an orthodoxy: “Liberalism is as distinct a tradition as exists in political history, but it suffers from being a practice before it is an ideology, a temperament and a tone and a way of managing the

world more than a fixed set of beliefs” (21). What are the practices of a liberal democracy that lead it, haltingly and imperfectly, to a more just and less cruel society? Gopnik cites a centerpiece of the civil rights movement: “Bayard Rustin, the great black and gay man who organized the march on Washington in 1963 and who, at the end of his long life, summed up his credo elegantly in the three simplest of distinctly liberal dance positions: 1) non-violent tactics; 2) constitutional means; 3) democratic procedures” (21). Our point is that forceful, effective reform is consistent with civility. Of course, those being reformed may resist it, but the question is whether the *terms* under which they resist are sustainable or coherent over the long haul. One of the oddities of the Charlottesville marches by neo-Nazis and anti-Semites is their insistence that *they* are not the racists; other people are. The logic is twisted, but the premise should compel our attention: in 1918, it would not have occurred to a Jim Crow racist to deny being a racist—there was pride in that label. Now, however, we have all learned the lesson of the civil rights movement: racism is immoral and indefensible, so watching racists twist and turn to avoid the label is in fact watching a victory, albeit one in progress and not yet complete.

The purpose of our book is to offer a specific reading of civility that aligns with pressing issues related to contemporary democratic theory and practice and one that resists oversimplifying the kind of communication that can help preserve, enhance, and improve our democratic culture. Our obligations are not just to facts, truths, or processes (although we do have such obligations); we also have obligations to the other strangers that we meet in our democratic lives. Analyses of the possibilities for our encounters with others and the practices we use in those encounters can help us see what is at stake in the everyday interactions of democratic life. If democracy is a wicked problem (see chapter 1), then we face a new test every time we must weigh our competing obligations and productively interact with the many different others we meet. We will not be arguing that we must always treat one another with civility, but we will be arguing that we must always think about how we treat one another if we want to build and maintain a democratic society. That kind of concern is a matter for communication theory and practice, but only when we see communication as more than the transmission of information. That kind of argument also highlights the importance of civility in building and maintaining the kinds of relationships between strangers that are necessary for democratic life.